

THE ARTISTS OF CHARTRES STREET
A MYSTERY SHORT STORY
BY ELLEN BYRON



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“Ten thousand bodies lie under the New Orleans sidewalks.”

Zemelda heard this many times a day from the tour guides who stopped on the street outside her centuries-old building. It served as a constant reminder of loss — *a reminder no one needs*, she thought, *especially me*. Friends, family, neighbors—outliving loved ones was a lonely business.

She heard music coming from the loft across the hall and smiled. Gwendolyn, the new tenant, liked to listen to music while she painted. Just like Zemelda once did. Zemelda didn't recognize the tune, but that wasn't new. She hadn't recognized the music of anyone who occupied the loft in decades.

The French Quarter townhome's ancient wooden stairs creaked under the weight of footsteps. A man emerged on the landing. His handsome face glistened with perspiration from the climb. Except for the artists' studios housing Zemelda and the new tenant, the building was unoccupied, used mostly as a storage facility these days. Fans did a poor job of making up for a lack of air conditioning. Even in early March, when the air was laden with the damp, biting chill that defined a New Orleans late winter, the top floor trended toward warm.

The man didn't notice her. Few people did. Zemelda saw he held a to-go coffee container from Café du Monde and a paper bag of beignets. This was no surprise. He'd made the same delivery several times in the week since Gwendolyn had moved in. He gave her new neighbor's door a rap and it opened. A lovely young woman stood in the doorway. She was petite and her features were gamine, finely defined and delicate. Her chestnut hair was pulled away from her

face in a high ponytail. The couple was similar in age. Zemelda guessed both to be in their early thirties. But there was a sadness to the woman. Her pale gray eyes were sunken, her skin flushed. Zemelda was sure she was unwell, although Gwendolyn — called Gwen by her friends — denied it.

The man, who Zemelda had learned was Alex, Gwen's soon-to-be-ex-husband, handed over the bag and coffee. "Special delivery."

Gwen took both and gave Alex a wry smile. "Again?"

He grinned and shrugged. "Who said a divorce has to be ugly?" He paused. "Or happen at all?"

A shadow crossed Gwendolyn's face. "We've been through this, Alex. You want out as much as I do."

"Yeah. I guess."

"You know."

Gwen's voice was firm, with an edge. Alex ran a hand through his sandy blonde hair. Zemelda noticed it was beginning to thin. "Can I keep bringing you coffee and beignets?" His tone was hesitant. "Please?"

Zemelda could tell Gwen wanted to say no. But instead she said, "Sure. Sometimes."

The couple said their goodbyes and Alex headed downstairs. Gwendolyn didn't move. She stood planted in the doorway. Zemelda felt for the young woman. "Would you like some company?" Gwen turned and walked back into her loft. She left the door open, which Zemelda took as an invitation to follow her, which she did.

The loft was a large open space, barely touched over the centuries. Giant sturdy beams supported the roof. Multi-paned iron-framed windows lined two walls, allowing for streams of

natural light when weather permitted. Paint flaked from the plastered walls, in one section revealing a spot of faded green original to the building. Gwendolyn's easel sat in the corner of the room between the two banks of windows. A canvas on the easel reflected one window's view of French Quarter rooftops. At least Zemelda assumed it did. The painting leaned toward the abstract. She noticed Gwendolyn hadn't made much progress in the last few days and attributed it to the young artist being dogged by whatever ailment was bothering her, as well as the emotional toll from her dissolving marriage. Zemelda had picked up enough snippets of conversation to know that the couple had married early and outgrown each other, leading to a string of affairs on Alex's side. Yet he was the one dithering about the divorce. Zemelda, skeptical thanks to hard-learned lessons from her own life, wondered if the financial aspect of the couple's relationship prompted the man's equivocating. An only child whose real estate developer parents perished in a private plane crash, Alex was enormously wealthy.

Zemelda took a seat on a wooden stool to watch Gwen work. The younger woman took a sip of coffee, then mixed a dollop of white into a dish of black paint to tint it gray. She began painting the slate shingles of a rooftop. After only a few minutes, she stopped. "I feel nauseous."

"You haven't eaten, have you? Eat something. Coffee on an empty stomach is never a good idea." Gwen took a few reluctant bites of a beignet. "Better?"

"A little. It comes and goes."

"You need air."

The bracing walk to The Historic New Orleans Collection's Chartres Street campus seemed to invigorate Gwendolyn. She and Zemelda entered the renovated Beaux Arts building and walked to the furthest gallery, where they took seats on a bench facing a wall displaying

nineteenth-century paintings. Their interest focused on a grouping of women's portraits, around a half-dozen in all. The subjects were clad in the hoop-skirted gowns of the time period and their poses were the typically demure ones of the Victorian era. But each woman was framed against the same backdrop, a vibrant wallpaper decorated with an explosion of extraordinarily vivid emerald-green ferns.

"I never get tired of studying these," Gwendolyn murmured as she scanned the portraits.

A Collection employee hovering nearby approached them. She exuded the energy of the twentysomething Zemelda assumed she was. Her nametag read "Charlotte." "It's the Ducroix Collection. They're incredible, aren't they?"

"Totally," Gwen said. "There's an almost shocking sensuality to them, especially given the rigid mores of when they were painted."

Charlotte gave a vigorous nod. "I know, right? I love them *so* much. The artist, Emile Ducroix, had a weird career. He did a bunch of decent portraits and then painted these amazing ones in about two years. Then the 1853 yellow fever epidemic came and killed off a ton of people in New Orleans. I haven't been able to research why, but after that Ducroix went back to painting the way he'd painted before. People lost interest in his work and he killed himself. It's like he got PTSD from the whole yellow fever thing and lost his talent."

"And his will to live," Gwen said, her eyes on the portraits.

"Right. That too. Anyway, there's something interesting about—" A dry, hacking cough came from a visitor browsing the gallery, interrupting Charlotte's train of thought. She made a face. "Ugh, that cough. I've been hearing it ever since Mardi Gras. There's something going around. Anyway..." Charlotte pointed to the paintings. "Here's the thing about this grouping. That green in the background of all of them is what they called Schweinfurt Green."

Schweinfurt Green. Also known as Emerald Green and Paris Green. Zemelda and Gwendolyn knew exactly what Charlotte was talking about. “I thought it might be Schweinfurt in the paintings,” Gwen said. “It was very popular at the time. And also very deadly.”

“Yes, exactly!” Charlotte said this with an over-abundance of enthusiasm. “They used it everywhere. Wallpaper, paint, furniture, candles, even kids’ toys. But it was loaded with arsenic, so it could actually kill people.” She glanced at the portrait group. “There’s so much green in these paintings. Maybe it got into Emile’s brain and drove him crazy. And that’s why he killed himself.” Her tone shifted to somber. “Arsenic is scary stuff. My dad uses it to kill rats back home in Texas.” The sound of the dry cough that was permeating the Quarter came from another visitor. Charlotte rolled her eyes. “Ugh. That is *so* annoying.”

A week later, the mysterious illness sweeping across the globe brought New Orleans to its knees, shuttering business, forcing residents to shelter in place, and filling hospitals beyond their capacity to treat the sick and dying— one of whom Zemelda feared would be Gwendolyn. A worried Alex brought his estranged wife food and drink every day, but the artist’s condition didn’t improve. Instead, she wasted away with a variety of symptoms. Zemelda came to realize some of them deviated from those associated with the global virus. An instinct borne of past experience tugged at her but when she shared it with Gwendolyn, the sick woman waved her off. “Think of the paintings,” Zemelda begged. “Think of the green.”

Gwendolyn shook her head. “I’m delirious. Go away. Go *away*.”

Finally, the sickness became too much for Gwendolyn to bear. An ambulance came for her.

Gwendolyn leaned back against the pillows on the bed at the far side of her loft. She'd been home a few days but was still weak from the battle with her illness. She sipped on broth from a ceramic cup. "There's no evidence, is there?" Zemelda asked.

Gwen shook her head. "Everything Alex brought me was in disposable containers. It's all gone. And with the chaos at the hospitals, no one had the time to take a deep dive into what was making me so sick. Since at least a few of my symptoms matched up with what virus patients exhibited, I was written off as one of them." The artist looked ill, but not with sickness—with grief. Haunted by knowing her husband had tried poisoning her by slipping arsenic into the food and drink he'd been delivering. "We got married on impulse. There was never a pre-nup," Gwen said. "That's been eating away at Alex. To lose money *and* me? Talk about failure, at least in his eyes. Alex could never admit to a mistake, even a mistake we both made in getting married way too young, and without putting much thought into it. Alex is spoiled rotten. Always has been. He can't lose at anything." Gwen stared out the window, where rain pattered down on the slate roof of the building next door. "Humiliation. That's why people kill sometimes. They can't handle being humiliated." Gwen began to speak then, overcome with emotion, she stopped. She swallowed and tried again. "You saved my life."

Zemelda Ducroix gazed over Gwen's shoulder. Paint had flaked off a large section of the wall behind her, revealing a small patch of green wallpaper featuring a once-vibrant fern design. "I recognized the signs. My husband Emile was an average artist. I was better. We had an arrangement where I added the finishing touches to his portraits. Those of the well-placed wives in the city. Never of the men, of course. That would not have been appropriate. Thanks to me, we made a respectable living. Then one day, Mrs. Charbonnet came to me in secret."

Gwen flashed on the portrait of an imposing grand dame in the Collection, posed in front of the bright green wallpaper, hands demurely clasped, a slightly sly smile on her face. “I know that painting.”

“After Mrs. Charbonnet, Mrs. Poche came, then Mrs. Ballard, until I’d completed half a dozen portraits. Emile was traveling up and down the river for months at a time to paint planters and their families, so I had freedom for a while. When he returned home, I revealed what I’d done and signed Emile’s name to all the green portraits, as I called them, since the very idea of a New Orleans gentlewoman being employed as an artist was scandalous back then. The paintings received great acclaim, which thrilled Emile... at first. But gradually the realization that I had a gift he could not match infuriated and humiliated him. He became cruel. Instead of subjugating me, though, the urge to revolt grew. Finally, during a particularly unpleasant battle with him, I threatened to reveal myself as the true artist of the portraits. I told him I no longer cared what anyone thought. I was proud of the work I’d created.” Zemelda paused, the memory still painful. “That’s when he began adding additional arsenic to my green paint.”

Gwen shuddered, recalling the agony of her near-fatal illness at the hand of her own husband. “I’m so sorry.” She stared out the nearby window, its glass panes wavy with age. When she spoke, her tone was pensive. “What’s ironic is that given the number of portraits you painted, and this being all over your studio...” Gwen gestured to the patch of green wallpaper. “...You were probably already inhaling enough of the Schweinfurt to die from it on your own.”

Zemelda nodded. “Yes. Emile hastened an inevitable process. The yellow fever epidemic of 1853 killed thousands of people that year. Like now, no one had time to look closely at the details of an illness, so I became another body in the unimaginable death toll.”

Gwendolyn stared at the vision in front of her. “You deserve credit for those paintings,” she said, angry.

Emily Aaronson, the Collection’s rare book curator, appeared on Gwen’s computer screen. “Gwen, so nice to meet you, albeit it virtually.”

“You too, Emily. I really appreciate Charlotte arranging this.”

“Charlotte’s a character, but she’s a find. We’re lucky to have her. She’s in grad school, working on a master’s in art history. She wants to become a curator herself, probably specializing in nineteenth century portraiture.” The curator held up a small, worn leather book. “We had the diary you dropped off for us authenticated. It’s a fantastic discovery.”

“I thought so. When I realized I was living in a studio where Zemelda Ducroix once painted, I began poking around. I was so excited when I found her diary.”

“I bet. The only painting we have that’s officially credited to her is the self-portrait, which I’m sure you’ve seen.”

“Yes.” Gwendolyn knew the painting well. It was the portrait of the woman she’d dismissed as delusions from her illness.

“I owe you an apology,” Emily said. “I jumped right into a conversation about the diary without tell you how sorry I am about your loss.”

“Thank you. It’s been hard. To think that you see someone one morning... You bring them coffee and beignets... And then...”

“I can’t even imagine. And with the hospitals exceeding capacity...”

“Oschner was total madness.”

“A friend’s husband is an E.R. doctor there. He recognized your husband because his family has been such a fixture in the city for generations. My friend said Alex exhibited some unusual symptoms that confounded the medical staff.”

“I know. It’s horrible how this disease keeps mutating I’ve never seen anyone so violently ill. I’d had the same symptom, so it wasn’t completely new to the doctors. But Alex’s case was way worse. He died before they could figure out the best course of treatment. I saw him take his last gasp of breath. I’ll never forget the expression on his face as he stared up at me from the EMT’s gurney.”

“Terrible,” Emily said. “Just terrible. And given the current circumstances, you can’t even get closure with a proper funeral.”

No. No funeral or anything. It was just me and his ashes, which I scattered into the Mississippi. I know Alex would have wanted that. The Gulf has claimed him as its own by now.” Gwen took a beat. “It’s hard for me to talk about this.”

“Of course. I’m sorry. It’s way too soon. We can talk about the diary if you’re up to it.”

“Yes. It’s actually a welcome distraction from my grief. Anyway, I have an idea I’d like to run by the powers-that-be at the Collection. I’m coming into a bit of money soon, and I’d like to fund a research project into Zemelda Ducroix’s life that would culminate in an exhibit of her work. It’s time for her to get the attention she deserves. The attention she was denied in her lifetime.”

“I love it. The project would restore credit where it’s due and introduce the world to brilliant female artist. And,” Emily grew more enthusiastic with each word, “we could display the diary as well. I can envision the entire exhibit. I’ll pitch it to the board, but I can’t imagine the reaction will be anything except an unqualified all-systems-go.”

“Wonderful. I think this would be a perfect project for Charlotte.”

“I agree a hundred percent. It’s right in her lane.”

Emily ended the call with a promise to confirm the project within days. Gwendolyn went to her easel, where a canvas with a partially completed portrait rested. Zemelda perched on a stool and assumed a pose. Gwen set to work on the painting. She’d captured the brilliant green of the background with a modern paint devoid of deadly ingredients. Now it was time to do her friend justice.

As Gwendolyn painted, Zemelda recalled the century and a half of people who’d come and gone from her home on Chartres Street. Generation after generation of neighbors who refused to believe in ghosts, even in the most haunted city in the country. Every last one of those neighbors denying her existence, and with it a chance to be recognized for her talent. Until now. “I’ve waited so long for someone to accept that they could see me,” Zemelda said. “*Merci*, Gwendolyn. Thank you.”

From outside on the street below, the women heard a tour guide for the first time in months. His voice was muffled by the mask he wore. “Ten thousand bodies lie under the New Orleans sidewalks.”

Zemelda smiled to herself.

And I am one of them.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *The Artists of Chartres Street* was inspired by this 1854 self-portrait of Zulmé Maspero de la Mardel, which I saw on display at The Historic New Orleans Collection. It’s the only painting every credited to the artist, although she is believed to be the mysterious “Z” signature on an 1838 painting of herself with two of her sisters-in-law.

Nothing else is known about her.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Ellen’s Cajun Country Mysteries have won the Agatha award for Best Contemporary Novel and multiple Lefty awards for Best Humorous Mystery. She writes the Catering Hall Mystery series, which are inspired by her real life, under the name Maria DiRico. Ellen is an award-winning playwright, and non-award-winning TV writer of comedies like *Wings*, *Just Shoot Me*, and *Fairly Odd Parents*. She has written over two hundred articles for national magazines but considers her most impressive credit working as a cater-waiter for Martha Stewart.

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